

Teen Future Teachers Find Inspiration During SIUE Conference

by Nicole Franklin

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EDWARDSVILLE - With more than 200 students and chaperones from 13 school districts in attendance, the 2023 Future Teachers Conference at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville received high marks from area high school students visiting the SIUE campus. This free conference held Nov. 3 in the Meridian Ballroom of Morris University Center (MUC) offered workshops, keynote presentations from both the 2020 Illinois Middle School Principal of the year and the 2023 Illinois Teacher of the Year, a teacher panel and a student panel with first-hand perspective of coursework and practicums.

“I’m a sucker for a student panel,” said Stella Smith, a fourth-year student in SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior (SEHKB). Stella Smith was an

integral part of the volunteer support staff for the conference. “Nobody knows campus life like students.”

Compared to its inaugural year, this second year of the conference co-sponsored by Madison County Career and Technical Education (CTE) System and Scott Credit Union saw the amount of attendees and participating school districts more than double.

Opening remarks by 2020 Illinois Middle School Principal of the Year and Illinois National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) National Distinguished Principal of the Year Tron Young, EdD, of Central School District 104, included modified lyrics to a rousing rendition of the theme song from the original television series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. He brought high energy while dressed in custom Converse sneakers marked “Principal.”

Young graduated from SIUE with a [Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Administration](#). Young is actually a three-time SIUE alum, also receiving an MSED in Education Administration (2009) and an Education Specialist Degree (2017). “I knew him when he was taking classes to become a principal,” said Angela White, SIUE Staff Senate secretary and director of field placements and educator prep for SEHKB. “I registered him for all of his classes when I was the graduate advisor for the school of education.”

White said conference attendees were equally inspired by the transformational story of lunchtime keynote speaker and 2023 Illinois Teacher of the Year, Briana Morales.

“Ms. Morales expressed that as a teacher you might be the only person they have. Each day, come in knowing you’re going to help this person no matter what it takes.”

Morales is an English teacher at Gordon Bush Alternative Center in East St. Louis School District 189. She was introduced by Denise Cobb, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs.

In addition to the speakers, students and their teacher chaperones experienced breakout sessions with topics such as “Why is teaching right for me?” and a hands-on “Effective Teacher Communicator” activity involving Lego sets.

The teacher panel included veteran educators from Collinsville, Alton and Granite City school districts. Their careers spanned more than 30 years. The student panel had representation from all four licensure programs: early childhood, elementary education, special education and secondary education.

Alison Reeves, PhD, associate professor and associate dean of SEHHB, noted that "the teacher panel helped attendees think about the benefits of becoming a teacher which is especially important given all the negative press about teaching including good pay, summers are off, excellent benefits and the potential to retire long before many of their friends."

In addition to in-person encounters, visitors to campus were introduced to [SIUE's Virtual Professional Practice Lab \(VPP\)](#), a partnership between SEHHB and Mursion™ innovative, mixed-reality technology that simulates experiences and interacts with participants to deliver real-world opportunities.

"They seemed really excited to use it because you get to teach active avatars," said Stella Smith. "I'm still a bit blown away that type of technology exists and I think that they kind of had a similar sentiment that SIUE had something like that."

Conference organizers also added an "Envisioning Your Future" discussion with SEHHB advisors offering instruction on how to register for classes and apply for scholarships and financial assistance.

All activities wrapped by 1pm so students could return to their home campuses. An evaluation report from the teacher chaperones showed an overwhelming positive response with 67% marking "excellent," 33% selecting "good," and zero selections of "fair" or "poor."

The more popular feedback from attendees was that they were "not ready to leave."

Reeves and White collaborated with Kaleb Smith, director of Madison County CTE, to launch the Future Teachers annual conference. Kaleb Smith's office oversees 11 school districts and promotes opportunities and technical assistance for high wage, high skill and high demand careers.

"We have faced a shortage of educators," said Kaleb Smith. "There is a demand steadily, right now in Illinois for pre-K through 12 education."

"Our office oversees the state and federal grants that fund career and tech education and education is considered a career-focused class and career-focused program."

Kaleb Smith's office manages the [IL state-funded grant launched four years ago](#) to underwrite the development of teacher pipelines and grow-your-own-teacher education programs within the high schools and the school districts.

“Future Teachers is as much of a celebration as it is a day of information. We have a chance to show the students how much the teaching profession is appreciated and needed within the region,” said Kaleb Smith. “We now have programs and pipelines that didn’t exist in seven different school districts. Here is a local opportunity through SIUE to identify high quality mentors.”

Esteemed conference attendees also included Illinois Representative Katie Stuart (D) and Representative Amy Elik (R).

“I love seeing the faces light up when they arrive here on campus,” said White. “Eddie greets them off the bus and our current students are their awesome hosts. They show them where their next session is going to be and spend time talking to them about their experience as an SIUE student.”

Reeves noted how the SIUE mission impacted the conference’s success. “We want a seamless transition from high school through graduation at SIUE. Future Teachers is a teaser to tell what cohort they’re in, grab them right from high school and show them their four-year path.”